

# Applied Research Partnerships with Developing and Transition Countries

## Swiss Universities of Applied Sciences and Universities of Teacher Education

### Project title

## Enabling Health Journalism

### Thematic focus

Health Journalism, Health Communication, Kenya

### Year

2009

### Project location

Kilifi, Mombasa, Nairobi; Kenya

### Swiss Institution

Institute of Applied Media Studies, Zurich University of Applied Sciences <http://www.linguistik.zhaw.ch/iam>  
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### Partner Institution

Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI), Centre for Geographic Medicine Research – Coast, (CGMR-C), Kilifi, <http://www.kemri.org>



### Description

The study had to identify the most relevant subjects of future research in the area of health journalism and its link to behavior change. 26 explorative interviews were held with media people, researchers, public health officials, and fieldworkers in contact to ordinary people in September 2009.

The results show that health information is a major factor in influencing personal discussions, but that current health journalism has major shortcomings. Especially for ordinary people in rural areas - those most vulnerable to diseases – radio (with very few health formats) and public meetings are the main channels for health information.

Thus many health relevant actors (women) seem to receive only few health information which at the same time is difficult to understand

### Development relevance

Especially in Africa, the deplorable health status of the majority of people hinders serious economic and social development. Consequently, improving health is targeted by various Millenium Development Goals. HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and diarrhoeal diseases cause most deaths in African countries. One of the most important steps towards better health is an

individual changing its health-related behaviour. This change is contingent upon a range of different factors. Health information, being it provided by mass media or communication campaigns, plays a specific role for inter-personal discussion which is believed to be one important trigger to actually change behaviour towards health promotion.



Radio, a most important source of health information for people in remote areas



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## Main features of the project

The study was a feasibility study in preparation of a future comprehensive research project. Thus it was limited in time, scope and resources.

The whole area of health information in mass media and public campaigns, their influence on personal discussions and in turn its effect on health behaviour is still underexplored and hardly based on empirical evidence. However, this knowledge is in high demand for initiatives in improving information and communication about health.

### Methodology and Procedures

The goals of the feasibility study were to be best achieved by explorative research working mainly with interviews of: ordinary people; medical researchers and public health officials; journalists, reporters as well as editors, media owners; professional observers of media performance in health NGOs and universities.

### Results

The most important results were that:

- o Health protective behaviour is hindered by structural factors as for example lack of access to health facilities and medical treatment and lack of individual resources.
- o Health protective behaviour is hindered by cultural factors as for example language-bound mind sets ("why use bed-nets if you don't sleep in a bed").
- o Health protective behaviour is hindered by factors related to information and communication as for example a scarce health journalism supply and limited media outreach in remote areas; a lack of simple "how-to-do"-messages in journalistic reporting; a preponderance of reporting about "quacks" in the media; and non-understandable language and medical jargon in the media.
- o Additionally it was seen that radio plays an important role in rural areas, as health information to the ordinary people is provided otherwise only in health dispensaries through "health talks", and through public meetings in the communities ("barazas").
- o Yet, health information is one of the most important information needs – but these needs are hardly fulfilled: for example radios are programming health information at times that don't fit in the daily schedules of the ordinary people. Health is hardly brought forward on a regular schedule.

Overall it was stated, that health journalism has the potential to provide useful information, ascribe relevance and salience to health issues, and can activate discussions (interpersonal communication) on health issues. But currently health journalism doesn't live up to these expectations, at least according to the views of the interviewees.

The study identified as relevant areas for future research:

- o scientific and statistically sound knowledge about the current status of health journalism in Kenya
- o better knowledge of how health journalism is used and assessed by ordinary people.



Exploration in the "field" is sometimes difficult



Tezo Medical Clinic near Kilifi - a typical health clinic in the area